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Police to protect vandalized home of fallen soldier

Associated Press

KOKOMO, Ind. — Police posted an around-the-clock security watch at the home of an Indiana soldier killed last week in Iraq after it was vandalized and his family received disturbing phone calls.

The home of Sgt. Rickey Jones was egged Saturday, three days after Jones' family learned the 21-year-old and three other soldiers had been killed by a roadside bomb north of Baghdad. His family also received phone calls in which the caller said: "I'm glad your son is dead."

The actions drew the attention of an Indiana congressman, Rep. Steve Buyer, a Republican who also chairs the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

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"It is outrageous, appalling and indecent for an American citizen to commit crimes and perversions against a family grieving at the loss of their son," Buyer said.

On Thursday, he spoke on the House floor asking his fellow lawmakers to stand and observe a moment of silence "to condemn these despicable acts."

"A great virtue of the American character is our compassion. It is how we care for each other in good times and in difficult times," he said.

"It is our compassion and human decency that represents the very best of our nation."

Jones' relatives and police are bracing for the possibility that a Topeka, Kan.-based group will protest at his funeral Monday.

Members of the Westboro Baptist Church have protested at military funerals across the nation, including shouting insults at soldiers' surviving relatives and holding signs that read "God Made IEDs" — a reference to roadside bombs.

The group claims American soldiers are dying in Iraq due to divine intervention because the United States harbors homosexuals.

The Westboro protesters, however, could face new restrictions at Jones' funeral if Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels signs a bill this week that would make disorderly conduct at a funeral a felony and keep protesters at least 500 feet from a gravesite.

That bill, which won final approval Tuesday from the Indiana House, would take effect immediately after being signed by Daniels. The governor's press secretary, Jane Jankowski, said Daniels would sign the bill as soon as it arrives on his desk.

"We're trying to get this family some closure, and not have to deal with these stupid signs," state Rep. John Smith, R-Kokomo, said Tuesday.

State Sen. Brent Steele, who authored the legislation, said the bill doesn't go as far as some states' attempts to hold back protests by the Westboro group.

"I went as far as I thought I could and still have a constitutional bill," said Steele, R-Bedford.

Mark Potok, a spokesman for the Southern Poverty Law Center, said it's still an open question whether some of the new laws restricting picketing are entirely constitutional.

He said his civil rights organization has listed the Westboro Baptist Church as a hate group for years. The minister who leads the group advocates making homosexuality a capital offense.

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